

# BLACK RECONSTRUCTION IN AESTHETICS

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*This essay uses the concept of reconstruction to make an argument and an intervention in relation to the practice and study of Black aesthetics. The argument will have to do with the parochialism of John Dewey, the institutional inertia of professional philosophy, the aesthetic dimensions of the US politics of reconstruction, the centrality of reconstructionist politics to the Black aesthetic tradition, and the staging of a reconstructionist argument in the film, "Black Panther" (Coogler 2018). The intervention aims to address the fact that arguments like these tend not to register properly because of certain reflexive and customary limits on some common forms of philosophical inquiry. The sort of professional philosophy I was raised to practise and value tends not to be particularly inclusive and open-minded, especially when it comes to subjects that bear directly on the thoughts, lives, and practices of people racialised as black. Black aesthetics, by contrast, is an inherently ecumenical enterprise, reaching across disciplinary and demographic boundaries to build communities of practice and exchange. Hence the need for an intervention: to create the space for arguments and the people who work with them to function across disciplinary and demographic contexts.*

*What is the object of writing the history of Reconstruction? Is it to wipe out the disgrace of a people which fought to make slaves of Negroes?*

– W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935)<sup>1</sup>

*The freedom movement has now reached the most decisive moment in our history, more ripe with possibilities [...] than any period since the overthrow of the first Reconstruction.*

– Jack O'Dell, “The Threshold of a New Reconstruction” (1965)<sup>2</sup>

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1 Du Bois 2014, pg. xxviii.

2 O'Dell 2010, pg. 110. (or: Kindle Locations 1536-1537).

## 1. Introduction: Moten's toys

In a recent interview with Stefano Harney, Fred Moten offers an intriguing picture of the spirit in which theorists may offer terms of art to their readers.<sup>1</sup> Refusing the familiar metaphor of stocking a conceptual toolbox, he turns instead to the image of children sharing a *toy* box. He explains the merits of this image:

With my kids, most of what they do with toys is turn them into props.... They don't play with them the right way – a sword is what you hit a ball with and a bat is what you make music with. I feel that way about these terms. In the end what's most important is that the thing is put in play.... [T]here are these props, these toys, and if you pick them up you can move into... a new set of relations, a new way of being together, thinking together (pp 105-06).

Moten expands on the point a bit later, focusing now on the work of writerly reflection:

[A] text is a *social* space.... [P]eople, things, are meeting there and interacting, rubbing off one another, brushing against one another.... [T]he terms are important insofar as they allow you, or invite you, or propel you, or require you, to enter into that social space. But once you enter into that social space, terms are just one part of it... (p 108) (emphasis added).

To offer a concept is to put something in play, to invite others to play along with you and see how far it takes them. At some point the standard of success must be something other than enjoyment or satisfaction, something like truth or warranted assertibility. But attempting to meet the standard can still involve shared experimentation. And this sharing will come burdened and en-

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1 Harney and Moten 2013.

riched by the complexities of human relationships, just as it does when children share, or decline to share, their toys.

I've started with Moten's reflections because I mean for this essay to enact, encourage, and embody the kind of ludic "thinking together" that he describes. The editors have generously offered me some space to extend my recent reflections on Black aesthetics. I propose to do this by deepening my engagement with a concept that has heretofore remained on the margins of these reflections. I started thinking in earnest about Black aesthetics many years ago, and used John Dewey's notion of reconstructing philosophy as a rhetorical point of entry. But it has since become clear to me that this notion can do more work, both for Dewey and for me.

I propose, then, to put the concept of reconstruction in play, to signal a determination to make an argument *and* an intervention. The argument will have to do with the parochialism of John Dewey, the institutional inertia of professional philosophy, the aesthetic dimensions of the US politics of reconstruction, the centrality of reconstructionist politics to the Black aesthetic tradition, and the staging of a reconstructionist argument in the film, "Black Panther" (Coogler 2018). But arguments like these tend not to register properly because of certain reflexive and customary limits on some common forms of philosophical inquiry. The sort of professional philosophy I was raised to practice and value, and that largely underwrites forums like this one, tends not to be particularly inclusive and open-minded, especially when it comes to subjects that bear directly on the thoughts, lives, and practices of people racialised as black. Black aesthetics, by contrast, is an inherently ecumenical enterprise, reaching across disciplinary and demographic boundaries to build communities of practice and exchange. Hence the need for an intervention: to create the space for arguments in the latter sphere to do work in the former, and for people to make the arguments across contexts.

The sense of reconstruction that animates this essay, then, maps directly onto Moten's sense of playful intellectual engagement. It aims to use this sort of engagement to expand the self-conception of the community of inquiry to open it to new members, subjects, methods, and perspectives. The burden of the essay will be to explain this transformation, but I wanted to start, to some degree, by modeling it. This is why I began with Fred Moten rather than with an authorising nod to one of philosophy's mighty dead. Dewey has already started to push toward center stage, so the dead will have their say. But to

start with Moten is to subject myself to the discipline that I'm demanding of the profession. A contemporary stalwart of Black Studies and related fields, Moten is a capacious thinker, as likely to reference Cavell and Wittgenstein as Coltrane and Wynter. He is also a challenging prose writer (in addition to being a celebrated poet), whose style can provoke in the unwary analytic philosopher the same dismay that led to Heidegger's long banishment from (our part of) the canon. But he is, most of all, a tremendous resource for the study of Black aesthetics (and much else). I do not know of any better evidence of the need for reconstruction than my own recently defeated willingness to remain silent about his work.

The analogy to play has the additional benefit of reinforcing the need for ground rules. In this spirit, it's worth making a couple of comments here at the outset.

First, I will assume in what follows that it is possible to talk coherently about racial phenomena. Race is not, as far as this essay is concerned, an illusion or a lie. It may be a myth, depending on what one thinks myths are; and it is surely not the motive force behind all human history or the most salient variable in every human interaction. But it is, for all that, in a suitably complicated sense of the term that will not get fleshed out here, real enough. Anyone needing argument on the point can consult the growing literature on the topic and return to this discussion at a more convenient time.<sup>2</sup> For current purposes I will simply help myself to concepts like the "Black" in "Black aesthetics," fully confident that sufficient backing is available should the need arise.

Second, nothing in what follows entails or requires that one accept Blackness as the only racial position with aesthetic dimensions worth exploring. Nor is it the only one that has animated a venerable and vibrant tradition of such explorations. It just happens to be the one I am interested in right now, and it happens, like the others, to repay attention to its specific and distinctive manifestations.

There is of course a great deal to say about the way different modes of racialisation interact, just as there is a great deal to say about the way racialisation intersects with the forces that animate other social identity categories. But one cannot say everything at once. As the study of these topics is in its infancy

in philosophical aesthetics, a provisional narrowing of the subject seems in order. Added to which, as we will see, part of the point of developing a philosophy of Black aesthetics is to connect to a pre-existing field of inquiry and practice that goes by that name and insists, much of the time, on this focus.

## 2. The wars of reconstruction

I have not argued for the thought that putting concepts in play is interestingly and productively different from what one might otherwise do with concepts. I have simply appealed to the authority of Moten and Harney, or, better, to the intuitive plausibility of their account of this activity. I do not propose to argue for it – not, at least, in any way other than trying it out and tallying up the results. But granting for now that there is something to this approach, it is worth explaining why I want to put this particular notion in play. Why *reconstruction*? Why take up reconstruction in relation to aesthetics?

One reason to take up a concept is, of course, that working with the notion in question might be instructive or otherwise illuminating. I will soon offer a reason like this for my approach here. Working through the concept of reconstruction can deepen my account of Black aesthetics, instructively complicate the legacy of John Dewey, and highlight the tensions between philosophy as a practice and philosophy as a profession. But pointing to a concept's uses does not explain how its potential for use became apparent.

Two factors put the notion of reconstruction in my path so that it might occur to me to work through it in the way I have proposed here. The first factor has to do with the accidents of history and biography that led to my interest in Black aesthetics, and that led me to the peculiar thought that Dewey could help me nurture that interest. This will, to some degree, be the topic of a later section.

The second factor is the state of racial politics in the US and beyond – or, perhaps better, the convergence of racial politics with politics full stop, for people who need these things to be separated. I chose to put the notion of reconstruction in play in part because the world did it first, and I found myself fairly confronted with the thought that this concept was a resource worth

mining, representing a reality worth confronting. That will be the topic of this section.

I received the commission for this essay a few short months after the first, now-infamous “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. A group of alt-right supporters gathered on the University of Virginia campus the day before the rally, galvanised by plans to remove a statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee. The mostly young, mostly male protestors “proudly proclaimed their loyalty to a white-nationalist ideology,”<sup>3</sup> shouted “white lives matter,” “blood and soil,” and “Jews will not replace us,” while marching in “a torchlight procession — a symbolic gathering meant to evoke similar marches of the Hitler Youth and other ultra-right nationalist organizations of the past century”.<sup>4</sup> The rally on the next day then devolved into violent conflicts with counter-protestors, one of whom died when an alt-right sympathiser aimed his car into a crowd.

The events in Charlottesville were striking for several reasons. The killing of Heather Heyer was tragic, and the apparent fragility of civility and order was sobering. But homicide and antisocial criminality are, sadly, not that unusual. This instance of antisocial and homicidal criminality was striking in part because it came during the latest in a series of increasingly brazen attempts to recuperate and mobilise white supremacist discursive machinery. The torchlight march, the cries of blood and soil, the defense of a Confederate monument in the name of a putatively shared American heritage, and the vocal refusal – which is to say, announcement, then refusal – of a Jewish conspiracy: all of these gestures manipulate familiar racist rhetoric and symbols in support of a white nationalist agenda.

One way to register the familiarity of the Charlottesville conflict is to think of it as another front in what historian Douglas Egerton calls “the wars of reconstruction”.<sup>5</sup> “Reconstruction” here names the period that followed the US Civil War and the process of rebuilding and recreating the social and political order that the war had destroyed. This process took multiple forms. Some involved straightforward political and policy initiatives, backed by military and

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3 Wallace-Wells 2017.

4 Helm 2017.

5 Egerton 2014, p 5971, 5863-5864.

police power. Others involved cultural and ethical projects backed by softer and more dispersed forms of power and influence, as we will see in the next section. All were viciously and vigorously contested, in the bitter struggles that give Egerton his animating metaphor and organising theme.

Charlottesville can represent a new front in these wars because these conflicts far outlasted the formal hostilities between the United States and the renegade Confederacy. The war was simply the most concentrated eruption of the violent contradictions that lay at the core of the American project, a project rooted, to put it only a little too crudely, in the valorisation and pursuit of freedom by an expansionist, slaveholding, settler colonial state. These contradictions defined the project from the beginning, and committed its architects and managers to periodically renegotiating the basic terms of cooperation to avoid open conflict. In this sense the three-fifths clause of the Constitution, the Fugitive Slave Act, and the Missouri Compromise were all ways of managing tensions that finally erupted in the Civil War. The end of the war did not resolve the tensions and contradictions, although some of the more ambitious advocates for the Reconstruction project imagined that it might. Some people thought that the post-war rebuilding might also be a second founding, serving to re-establish the American project on a new, more secure footing. But what actually happened was that the same cycle of periodic renegotiation resumed, only with new stakes. Before the Civil War the question had been whether the union would hold. After the war, after reconstruction, the question had to do with the prospects for reconciling American democracy with racial justice; or, put differently, for comprehensively rooting out the social, political, and ethical conditions for the persistence of white supremacy. Charlottesville showed that the question has yet to receive a satisfactory answer.

### 3. The aesthetics of reconstruction

Once one notes the persistence of the wars of reconstruction, it is easy to credit the aesthetic implications of this state of affairs. Warfare is always bound up with expressive culture, most clearly in the narratives and symbols that combatants use to cultivate patriotic fervor and to galvanize hatred for the enemy. The wars of reconstruction are no different. The domain of the

aesthetic is one of the fronts in these wars, in ways it will pay for us to consider in relation to the broader history of reconstruction politics.

The Reconstruction era got its name from a constellation of programs launched by the US federal government in the wake of the Civil War. These programs aimed mainly to restore order in the vanquished southern states, while also, to varying degrees, uprooting the white supremacist, anti-democratic, and secessionist practices that defined the erstwhile Confederacy. This federal initiative came to an end in 1877, when the provisional consensus of pro-Union and anti-slavery political forces that supported it splintered under the pressures of fatigue and of white supremacist recalcitrance.

The basic reconstructionist impulse – aimed at rooting out the conditions for the persistence of white supremacist and anti-democratic practices – survived the demise of the federal initiative, and worked on multiple levels to animate a variety of activities and projects. There was, for example, a constellation of local and regional movements, policies, and initiatives, many of which began with federal support but continued without it as long as they could manage in the face of lethal and terroristic violence. Underwriting many of these efforts was an ideological commitment to a general cultural reorientation, organised around revised understandings of freedom, equality, community, democracy, and citizenship. And underwriting this ideological program was a project of ethical counter-habitation, calling individual citizens to locate and cultivate the better angels of their natures and repudiate their “unreconstructed” anti-democratic sentiments.

The ethical and cultural dimensions of the broader Reconstruction program point toward the relevance of this program, and of its prehistory, for the work of Black aesthetics. Whatever Black aesthetics is – a topic we have not come to yet, I realise – it will have to involve the work of people like the great abolitionist Frederick Douglass, whose greatness is constituted in large part by his determination to use culture work to clarify the contradictions and injustices of a slaveholding democratic republic. Douglass’ speeches, writings, and visual culture strategies deserve pride of place here,<sup>6</sup> but there are many other examples of aesthetic strategies being brought to bear on the work of vindicating black humanity and imagining political transformation. Harriet Beech-

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6 See Stauffer et al (2015).

er Stowe's massively influential novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, is just one example, albeit one that also does us the service of raising thorny questions about, for example, the limits of didactic art and the relationship between ethical and aesthetic criticism.

These transformational aesthetic interventions continued into the Reconstruction era proper, and well beyond. Culture workers continued to use visual art, song, oratory, drama, literature, and other forms to insist on Black humanity, to reimagine racially oppressive and exploitative social arrangements, and to call attention to the damage that white supremacy was doing to black life and to the causes of democracy and justice. This work did not stop when the federal program ended in 1877, any more than the local struggles for institutional transformation ended. In this spirit one might think of the "New Negro" movement usually associated with the Harlem Renaissance as a continuation of this Reconstructionist cultural program.

Despite the steady persistence of Reconstructionist efforts after 1877, the demise of the federal Reconstruction program did mark a real change in the prospects for transformation. From this point on the US state declined to enforce the new dispensation and then, to varying degrees in various places, threw itself fully into the work of restoring, or "redeeming," something very much like the old dispensation.<sup>7</sup> Violence flowed into the breach created by the "Redemption" of the political and cultural forces that animated the old south, as lynching and "white riots" became routine methods of reining back in the labour power and political aspirations of the nominally free African American population. Until the passage of federal civil rights legislation in the 1960s, white supremacy reasserted itself and clung assiduously to its cultural importance and political influence.

Then, after the Second World War, the Reconstructionist program found new openings. This was the beginning of what activist and organiser Jack O'Dell calls "the new reconstruction" (2010), and what Manning Marable (1984) calls "the Second Reconstruction". In the 1950s and 1960s the ongoing struggles of what some scholars call "the long Civil Rights Movement," reaching all the way back to the 1920s and 1930s, gained new traction with governmental authori-

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7 For ease of exposition, I am using "the state" as a placeholder for a handful of different governmental-administrative structures, operating on different geographic and administrative scales. Attending to the details here would take us too far afield of the topic.

ties and with US popular opinion. Thanks to the efforts of people like O'Dell, Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, and Martin Luther King, Jr., and to the organisations they helped lead and build, the nation now seemed to be returning to the Reconstructionist project nearly a century after the premature end of the project's first iteration.

As with the first Reconstruction, the twentieth century US black freedom movement accepted aesthetic experience as an appropriate and promising arena for political engagement. Public memories of the movement's accepted political heroes are bound up with specific styles of oratory, dress, and bodily comportment, though the resulting focus on middle class, Christian, heterosexual Black men is in tension with at least some of the movement's stated goals. In addition, culture workers practicing in a variety of idioms, in various relationships to elite and popular artworld communities, took the movement's priorities as inspiration and as subject. Think here of everyone from Gwendolyn Brooks and Joan Baez to James Brown and Max Roach. Finally, many of the more controversial inhabitants of this cultural moment, like Malcolm X, Huey Newton, and Angela Davis, found their substantive contributions to the elimination of racial (and other forms of) injustice bound up with their stylistic innovations. Angela Davis has spoken eloquently and poignantly to this phenomenon in a wonderful essay about the reduction of her historical legacy to a hairstyle.<sup>8</sup>

#### 4. The ironies of American philosophy

The opening of a new front in the US wars of reconstruction – or, one might say, the revival of Redemptionism as a broadly viable political and cultural force – encouraged me to put the notion of reconstruction in play. But the notion may not have struck me as a potential resource for specifically *philosophical* reflection, had John Dewey not tried to mobilise it for this purpose first. What really did the trick was the realisation that I had tried to use Dewey's use of reconstruction to build the bridge between professional philosophy and Black aesthetics, while mostly ignoring Dewey's own inattention to the deeper meanings of the concept. This layering of oversights or evasions – layered because Dewey's came first, to be compounded by mine – interests me now not

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8      Davis 1994.

as an occasion to take the canon down a peg, but as a cautionary tale about the dangers that await and the ironies that attend superficial invocations of the idea of reconstruction.

Almost a hundred years ago, in 1920, Dewey published a little book of lectures called *Reconstruction in Philosophy*.<sup>9</sup> The book's organizing theme animated most of his mature work in one way or another: society's needs and capacities have outgrown its practices and assumptions, he argued, and something must be done. He chose to use the idea of reconstruction to help make this point, but somehow failed, or declined, to notice that this choice points in the direction of an even richer and more challenging philosophical practice than he imagined.

Dewey thought that liberal democratic society (in its industrial, capitalist, and managerial form, we would now add) needed reconstructing, and a reconstructed philosophy was essential to meeting this need. This meant, among other things, uprooting some familiar but damaging intellectual and professional habits in philosophy, and using the newly liberated practice of inquiry to root out similarly damaging habits in the wider society. These bad philosophical habits involved broad misconceptions of experience, knowledge, history, truth, and other such things, all wrapped up in a general inattention to historical and phenomenological context. But the details of this worry are less important right now than the punchline: recovering philosophy from these mistakes would enable it to embrace a vital social role, a role Dewey would describe later as a "criticism of the influential beliefs that underlie culture".<sup>10</sup>

Equipped with this philosophical model of cultural criticism, Dewey spent much of his career reinterpreting concepts at the heart of vital social institutions and practices. He argues in *Individualism Old and New* (1930) that the most influential strains of twentieth century political thought are rooted in flawed conceptions of freedom and of the individual, conceptions forged in the fires of earlier social conflicts and carried over without appropriate adjustment (which is to say, it makes sense to demand liberty or death in response to King George in a way that it probably doesn't in response to the New Deal.) Similarly, he argues in *Art as Experience* (circa 1934) that the dominant

9 Dewey 1948.

10 Dewey 1985.

conceptions of art are rooted in flawed conceptions of aesthesis and expression, misconceptions directly traceable to misunderstandings of experience as such.

Dewey's emphasis on historically informed, phenomenologically responsible, reconstructive cultural criticism comes with several strange ironies in tow. Some are tangentially related to the topic of this essay, but need not detain us. Think here of the way Dewey's appeals to cultural criticism look rather little like anything a contemporary reader would assign that name. Or think of the way he declines to subject the concept of reconstruction to the sort genealogical scrutiny that he gives concepts like "art," "individualism," and "experience".

The principal irony is that Dewey's uses of "reconstruction" maintain a distressing distance from the racial politics that surround the term in US contexts. He seems to have employed the notion largely as an allusion to World War I, and to the need for the sort of postwar restoration that the term "reconstruction" broadly signifies. But, as we have seen, this term happens also to name a project that is intimately bound up with the afterlife of the US Civil War and with the bitter and lethally violent racial politics that drove and dominated this war. The struggles over this project cast a deep shadow over US social life during Dewey's lifetime. Even worse, the shadow fell rather directly across Dewey's own life – he was born in 1859, and his father fought in the Civil War – and, if Louis Menand is right, across his philosophical commitments.<sup>11</sup> But it somehow manages not to fall over the *Reconstruction* lectures, which remain utterly disinterested in the fact of white supremacy, much as the rest of Dewey's work would lead one to expect.

The irony of a child of the Reconstruction era remaining silent on the persistence of that era's conflicts is particularly striking if one considers the extremely public forms that the conflicts had taken in the years leading up to 1920. Lynching, which is to say, lethal and extra-legal violence overwhelmingly visited on Black people as a terroristic method of social control, had by that time become a thriving social practice. It had also become, among people who fancied themselves more enlightened than the residents of the unreconstructed south, something of a national scandal. In 1918, Leonidas Dyer intro-

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<sup>11</sup> Menand 2001. Menand argues that American pragmatism's core commitments derive in part from the experience that its architects had with the divisions of the US Civil War.

duced legislation in the US House of Representatives to stop the scandalous practice, spurred by the vigorous public advocacy of Ida B. Wells-Barnett and, somewhat later, others (including the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP], an organisation that Dewey helped create). The Dyer Bill immediately became a source of intense controversy and remained unsuccessfully on the legislative horizon for years. Similarly, there was the so-called “Red Summer” of 1919, when US veterans of colour returned from fighting overseas only to find their freedoms still radically, violently, and infamously curtailed by deadly “white riots” at home.

Perhaps the best example (for an essay in aesthetics, anyway) of the ongoing struggle between reconstruction and redemption might be the bitter cultural debate over works like D.W. Griffith’s landmark film, “Birth of a Nation”. Released in 1915, this cinematic re-telling of a sensationalist racist novel affirmed a number of troubling racist and sexist propositions. It depicted Black people as unfit for democratic self-government and as threats to law and order. The sense of law and order it relied on was rigidly gendered and racialised. It rendered black men as rapacious and predatory threats to white womanhood, and by extension to the political order that required white male authority over and access to all female sexuality. Similarly, it rendered black women as licentious and predatory temptresses, whose wicked influence over white men could, as one of the film’s title cards put it, “blight a nation”. The film motivated its narrative by affirming and amplifying the racist and sexist myths that were at that very moment being used to justify lethal terroristic violence. In these ways and others, it justified mass disfranchisement and extra-legal violence in support of white supremacist modes of social organisation. (It is also, as is well known, a landmark in the history of cinema. As one writer puts it, the worst thing about the movie is how good it is.<sup>12</sup> It is therefore grist for the mill of reflection on the relationship between aesthetic criticism and moral criticism. That is not my topic here.)

The film struck many observers and activists as scandalous and dangerous from the start. It inspired nationwide protests and boycotts, and led to an abortive NAACP campaign to produce a response film, to fight the fire of cinematic propaganda with fire. Nevertheless, the film, along with a great many similar creative works in print, on stage, and on screen, prospered and en-

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12 Brody 2013.

joyed great popularity. Figures like filmmaker Oscar Micheaux and journalist William Monroe Trotter worked tirelessly to dispel the myths that animated these aesthetic products. But their efforts ran aground on considerations that Egerton puts it like this: “elegantly written monographs [like Du Bois’s *Black Reconstruction* (1935), written to counter the pseudo-scholarly version of Griffith’s narrative then current among US historians] were no match for romantic fiction” (like *Gone With the Wind* (1939)), and “reasoned editorials about the truth of Reconstruction were no match for popular media” like film.<sup>13</sup>

These glimpses of the state of racial politics in the early twentieth century should sharpen the tensions I have tried to tease out of Dewey’s *Reconstruction* lectures. If the point of the broad reconstructionist program was to renew the prospects for American democracy and to subdue white supremacy as a political force, then this work was very much still ongoing, with its outcome still hanging in the balance. This work had, moreover, become a matter of national controversy, fueled by extremely high-profile contests over federal legislation, popular art, and appropriate uses of political violence. And while all this was happening, Dewey actively recommended, without irony, something that made almost no contact with any aspect of this wider situation, but that he nevertheless described as “reconstruction”.

## 5. Missed connections: ideas and institutions

I have read Dewey in a way that opens the door to a number of interesting questions, but the work I have in mind for this essay requires closing the door on most of them. One might ask, for example, what led Dewey to use the idea of reconstruction in 1920 and then to abandon it soon after? How could he fail to notice the rhetorical and potentially substantive alignments between his philosophical program and the challenges of the Jim Crow era?

Answering these questions would require scholarly excursions that, however fascinating, would lead away from the subject of this essay. Insights surely await in the historical record – in Dewey’s correspondence, say. Engaging the literature on Dewey and race would also be instructive, especially since that literature has grown considerably in scope and sophistication in recent years.

But my aim in highlighting Dewey's apparent indifference to the historical baggage of Reconstruction is not to work toward explaining these missteps, if that's what they are, or toward reconciling them with his considered philosophical views.

(One short digression may not be amiss, though, since it takes on an issue that, if left untended, may distract from the work of this essay. One easy way to account for Dewey's indifference is to credit the profundity of the world-historical shift that came with the First World War. The sixty-year-old Dewey can surely be forgiven, one might think, for letting this devastating cataclysm that was not really about race turn his attention away from a race-related conflict that happened when he was a baby. Unfortunately, this move just pushes the worry back, or perhaps up, a step. For one thing, and as noted above, the white supremacist commitments that animated the US Civil War also spawned bitter controversies on the domestic front both during and after the war years. For another, and as Du Bois ably argues in "The African Roots of the War," these same commitments were also very much at work *in* World War I. We tend not to notice because we falsely think of the war as a contest only involving white people, and because foregrounding the agency of white people routinely discourages people from applying race-theoretic analyses. But race-thinking was central to the evolving conceptions of civilization and progress, and to the great power machinations, that both led to "The Great War" and were undone by it. So: tracing Dewey's race- and reconstruction-blindness to the greater gravity of a World War somehow purified of racial politics only deepens the problem.)

Dewey's decontextual lapse is instructive here because it shows him missing connections that philosophical aestheticians are still missing today, connections with important resonances for our current practices. Worse, it shows him apparently failing even to notice that the connections are there. We can learn from his example and work harder to notice these opportunities and to take advantage of them.

First, we see him missing opportunities to bring powerful philosophical tools to bear on important social conditions. His failure to subject the culture of white supremacy to philosophical criticism is in part a failure of theoretical imagination, as is his tardy and partial recognition that cultural criticism

might productively involve a robust, sustained engagement with particular artifacts in popular culture and in everyday life.

Contemporary philosophical aestheticians are in danger of a similar failure. We are witnessing the second redemption of exclusionary white identitarianism in the US and the revival and growth of xenophobic right populism in Europe. Both of these developments rely heavily on aesthetic strategies, and so far we have had little to say about them. Taking on board the questions and resources of critical social theories – like critical race theory and decolonial feminism – would be one way to deepen our engagement with these pressing and aesthetically rich phenomena.

A second missed connection involves the institutional conditions that enable the aforementioned failure of theoretical imagination. If we think of Dewey's indifference to the legacies of Reconstruction as the deliverance of a whitely epistemology of ignorance, it behooves us to consider the social conditions that produce and enable this ignorance.<sup>14</sup> José Medina might say at this point that the conditions for an epistemology of *resistance* were not sufficiently developed: Dewey was not enmeshed in the circuits of exchange and communities of inquiry that would have pushed back against – resisted – the easy ignorance of racial conditions that white supremacy cultivates even in well-meaning moral agents.<sup>15</sup> There is an easy story to tell about how this happened to Dewey, working as he did in a rigidly segregated academy. But once again, I mean to bracket the question of whether and how much this historical figure could have fought the constraints of his social environment. I am more interested in learning from his example and actively working to build more responsibly constructed communities of inquiry.

Undertaking philosophical reconstruction in this critical spirit means working on at least two levels. One level involves the sort of work professional philosophers usually do and are most comfortable doing: appealing to theoretical and conceptual considerations to recommend different ways of thinking. But a second level involves the sort of work we do too infrequently and too haphazardly: interrogating and grappling with the institutional conditions under which dominant ways of thinking attain their influence. This takes us back to

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14 Sullivan and Tuana 2007; Mills 1997.

15 Medina 2012.

Moten and Harney's focus on ways of thinking and being together. Philosophy happens in social contexts, and some of these contexts happen to be curated by professional associations and scholarly societies. We often treat these associations like low-stakes social clubs, charged simply with organizing the next meeting in deference to whatever traditions and customs have governed every other meeting we can remember. But history sometimes brings us to crucial points at which the leaders of these organizations have to take seriously the burdens and opportunities of leadership and organisational design. We have reached one of those points, both because of general challenges facing humanistic scholarship in the higher education sector and because of the broader political challenges of the moment.

I could continue here in a disapproving spirit. I could draw on recent events in the profession to suggest some of the dangers that await if we decline to attend with sufficient care to evolving social conditions and to the institutional work that these conditions require. But some of us have already done this in a series of complaints about the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics (an organisation that I value and have had the privilege of serving in a leadership role, which is to offer some reassurance that I am not simply venting hostility).<sup>16</sup> So I will simply drop those grievances into the background and turn instead to some positive suggestions about ways to build the connections that went missing in Dewey's work.

The key to learning from Dewey's oversights is to gain clarity on just what he overlooked. He missed, or evaded, possible connections between his concrete sociohistorical context and his abstract call for social and philosophical reconstruction. This evasion was possible and perhaps necessary, one might think, because Dewey declined to challenge certain artificial constraints on his philosophical aspirations, and on the community of inquirers that helped form his aspirations. This returns us once more to the idea of putting concepts in play in order to do what Moten describes in our opening quotations as moving into a new set of relations. Dewey did not follow the concept of reconstruction into a social space that furnished him with interlocutors who could push him in new directions. Or, better: he was *already* in a promising social space – as noted above, he was one of the founders of the NAACP, and

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16 The pieces I have in mind here appeared in a series published by the blog *Aesthetics for Birds*. Taylor 2017; Eaton 2017; Peterson 2017.

with varying degrees of openness and vigour supported causes we would now think of as part of a civil rights or racial justice agenda. But somehow this social intercourse failed to reach the core of his sense of himself as a philosopher, even though he was at that very moment demanding a reconsideration of philosophy's relationship to social life.

I have suggested that Dewey's recovery of philosophy fell short because he declined to push the boundaries of an artificially constrained community of inquirers. To say this is to offer a provisional diagnosis for a fairly narrow purpose. I will say again: the aim is not to make a definitive contribution to Dewey scholarship; it is rather to continue and advance the round of discursive play that began with the appeal to reconstruction.

The point of this diagnosis is to raise questions like these: What happens if we accept the provocation that comes with the rise of expressive white supremacy, and we interrogate the aesthetic dimensions of racist habits and racist cultures? What happens if we examine the work of philosophical aesthetics from the wider perspective that results from reconsidering the social dimensions of philosophy as a professional practice? That is: what happens if we take Reconstruction seriously as an historical reality in relation to philosophy?

## 6. Assembling Black aesthetics

One way to take reconstruction seriously is to do the work that unreconstructed intellectual and professional habits rule out. If the exclusions and silences of accepted modes of inquiry are among the residues of a racist culture, then reconstructing the culture will mean reconstructing those modes of inquiry, and shifting the boundaries of the acceptable. In philosophical aesthetics, this might mean taking up the challenges of critical race aesthetics, or, more narrowly, of Black aesthetics.

The burden of this section will be to summarise and slightly reframe my own philosophy of Black aesthetics in order to put reconstruction at the center of the project. This move will clarify both the critical impulses that animate the tradition and the nature of the topics that constitute the tradition's subject

matter. It will also bring into relief some respects in which the approach I recommend raises some interesting questions.

People who know nothing or nearly nothing about Black aesthetics – which is to say, most professional philosophers, at least until recently – tend to take the name of the enterprise as an occasion for worry. It seems like shorthand for a view about some tight link between racial identity and the norms that govern the way Black people produce, evaluate, or engage aesthetic objects. The view might be that Black people do, as an empirical matter, tend to have and enjoy certain kinds of aesthetic experiences. Or it might be that Black people *should* have and enjoy certain experiences, and that if they do something else then they're wrong or broken. But either way the view is at least a trifle worrisome. Any empirical generalisations that reach across the various contexts in which Black people can be found – different ethnicities, national origins, languages, and so on – are bound to be weak or philosophically uninteresting. And any norms that aspire to bind these same people across contexts are likely to be oppressive or rooted in a bankrupt mode of essentialism.

The most prominent sources for the idea of a Black aesthetic, many of them, did their part to contribute to this worrisome perception. For the architects of the US Black Arts and Black Aesthetic movements in the 1960s and 1970s, as for their cultural nationalist heirs in the 1980s, the articulation of norms that were binding on all Black people was often part of the mission. There were various ways to arrive at this commitment. Some involved the sort of dubious metaphysical claims – about, say, the nature of Black “soul” – that raise worries about invidious essentialism. But there were other paths, including psychological claims about the conditions for mental health under white supremacy, and political claims about the prerequisites for cultivating an appropriately revolutionary anticolonial consciousness. Whatever the argument, a variety of people in a variety of spheres found themselves drawn to the idea of distinctively Black norms for the production and evaluation of aesthetic objects.

Interestingly, though, the people who articulated ideas related to the Black aesthetic explicitly located themselves in wider circuits of exchange and debate. People like Larry Neal, Addison Gayle, and Alice Walker knew that they were carrying forward vital traditions of culture work. For this reason, Gayle and Neal reprinted people like Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, and W.E.B. Du Bois in their anthologies, while Walker devotes much of her groundbreaking

book of essays, *"In Search of Our Mother's Gardens"*, to reckoning with the legacies of Zora Neale Hurston and Flannery O'Connor. (Yes, O'Connor. Wait.) At the same time, they knew they were enmeshed in arguments with contemporaries and near-contemporaries like Ralph Ellison, whose cosmopolitan liberalism put him at odds with the nationalism of Baraka and others.<sup>17</sup>

These links between the self-described Black aestheticians and the figures that they both drew from and debated suggests a way of linking the mid-century movements to a broader enterprise. The broader enterprise connects New Negro or Harlem Renaissance figures like Locke and Jessie Fauset to later figures like Baraka and Gwendolyn Brooks, and to even later figures like Skip Gates and Thelma Golden, both of whom launch vital critical and curatorial projects by explicitly orienting themselves to these predecessors. It also forges synchronic and transnational links connecting these same figures to their contemporaries around the world. Think here of the way Du Bois and Locke circulated – both physically and by way of their writings – in communities of artists, theorists, and critics in Europe, the Caribbean, and Africa.

For these reasons and others, it struck me as an unfortunate waste of conceptual resources to limit the idea of the Black aesthetic to the moment and the figures that simply got around to naming it explicitly. The promise of the idea had to do with the way it connected these people and the products of their work across time and space, *and* across their various disagreements and debates. Ellison had little use for what Baraka thought of as "Black art," but they nevertheless shared something – something rooted precisely in the occasions for their disagreement. And they shared this something also with Toni Morrison, Miriam Makeba, Jean Toomer, Phyllis Wheatley, Edouard Glissant, and Frederick Douglass.

Here was the solution to the worry about the parochialism or worrisome particularism of "the" Black aesthetic: expand the reference of the label so that it covers both the self-described Black aestheticians *and* the other participants in the tradition that informed and challenged them. Understood in this way, the unity of the enterprise does not require agreement on a set of claims about what Black art requires or involves. It requires only a shared willingness

to explore the kinds of issues and to grapple with the kinds of questions that lead to claims about things like the requirements of Black art.

Understood in this wide-ranging, dynamic way, the Black aesthetic enterprise is best thought of as a thematic tradition. I use the term “tradition” in the way Jeff Stout counsels us to, to denote “a discursive practice considered in the dimension of history”.<sup>18</sup> A tradition is not reducible to a theory or a set of claims and practices; it is instead constituted by an ongoing conversation *about* the theories, claims, and practices that jostle for pride of place at the core of an enterprise. The Black aesthetic tradition, then, is the ongoing, transgenerational, discursive practice of arguing about, theorising about, and otherwise engaging with the questions that routinely arise in relation to the aesthetic dimensions of racialisation-as-black. These questions inform the themes or, following Stuart Hall, the “problem-spaces,” that animate the tradition.<sup>19</sup>

Once we adopt this approach, the problem-spaces that define the Black aesthetic tradition come readily into view. A look back over the accomplishments that are typically regarded as the pinnacle of Black cultural achievement reveals some recurring themes. To take just three examples, culture workers across idioms, eras, and forms routinely take up questions about invisibility, authenticity, and appropriation.

The question of invisibility involves the condition of having one’s presence and complex personhood denied or effaced on racial grounds. Towering achievements like Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, Michele Wallace’s *Invisibility Blues*, and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* are among the clearest encounters with this question. But critiques of the idea of invisibility, or of the determination to put it at the center of Black life, are also part of the tradition. Consider for example the Black Arts movement critiques of Ellison’s iconic novel, some of which held, in essence, that if the novelist or his characters felt invisible, then they must have been hanging out with the wrong people. Or consider the line of Black feminist and queer argument that insists on the distinctive

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18 Stout 2004, p 135.

19 Hall 2005.

forms of invisibility that result from the common conflation of Blackness with cisgender, heterosexual, masculine Blackness.

The question of authenticity involves the thought that certain practices, attitudes, and so on are in some sense more appropriate than others to the bearers of particular racial identities. This was clearly one of the questions at the core of the US Black Arts movement. It was just as clearly an occasion for vigorous contestation at that moment and long before. There is, for example, the disagreement between Ellison and Baraka, brought to a head in Ellison's famous review of Baraka's germinal text, *Blues People*. There's also the similar disagreement between the older and the younger figures in the Harlem Renaissance over the relative merits of jazz and of "folk" culture. Or consider the arguments about producing literature in the coloniser's language, arguments prominently featuring figures like Kenyan writer N'gugi Wa Thiongo.

The question of appropriation may be the most familiar of the core questions that animate the Black Aesthetic tradition. The issue here usually gets rendered – too simply, Lewis Gordon (1997) reminds us – as a matter of people in one ethnoracial group borrowing or stealing artifacts or practices from another.<sup>20</sup> Think here about the arguments people used to have about Elvis Presley and black music, or about white jazz or blues musicians. These debates routinely arise now in relation to hip-hop culture, though the most prominent recent example may come from the artworld controversy around Dana Schutz's *Open Casket*.<sup>21</sup>

There are other recurring questions and debates in the Black aesthetic tradition, but these few should provide enough of a backdrop to make sense of the core thought: that a productive way to approach Black aesthetics philosophically is as a tradition of engagement with the aesthetic dimensions of Black life. This engagement unfolds by appeal not (or not just) to the long memory

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20 See Taylor 2016, pp. 182-85 for a gesture at these debates and some resources related to them.

21 Curators Christopher Lew and Mia Locks included Dana Schutz's painting, "Open Casket," in the 78th Whitney Biennial in the spring of 2017. The abstracted image of Emmett Till in his coffin struck them as a sincere effort to engage with complex questions of racial justice, racist violence, and historical trauma. It struck others as an unethical leveraging of Black experience and trauma for individual artistic gain. Protests ensued, with Afro-US artist Parker Bright and Afro-British artist Hannah Black lodging perhaps the most prominent objections. See Haslett 2017; Kennedy 2017.

of specific cultural norms and practices reaching across generations and geographic distances, but to questions, arguments, and debates that reach not just across generations and geography but also across norms and creative idioms. No particular norm or practice is sufficiently consistent across space and time to give the tradition the philosophical depth (as opposed, say, to anthropological depth) that has been claimed for it. But this depth has been claimed rightly, as we can see when we relocate it from the domain of the empirical and the prescriptive to the domain of the theoretical and critical.

Having motivated the problem-space approach, which supports the thought that “Black aesthetics” names a dynamic tradition rather than a static set of norms or practices, we are finally in position to put the idea of reconstruction in play once more. I have suggested that the way to think of (people like) Phyllis Wheatley, Suzanne Césaire, Derek Walcott, and Ava DuVernay as participants in a unitary enterprise is to root the enterprise in an ongoing series of thematically organised dialogic exchanges. What makes these exchanges part of a single enterprise is their shared interest in the aesthetic dimensions of Black life-worlds, or of racialisation-as-Black. Invoking racial Blackness in this way implicates the entire apparatus of modern racialization, since that is the context in which this mode of racialisation takes shape and does its work. And to invoke that apparatus is to invoke the conditions that make reconstruction necessary.

I am making my way to the thought that the question of reconstruction, like the questions of authenticity, invisibility, and appropriation, anchors one of the core problem-spaces in the Black aesthetic tradition. For Black people in the modern world, navigating a racialised social landscape has meant, among other things, coming to grips with white supremacy. It means other things too, because Black people are still people, and have all the challenges and possibilities that people have *qua* people, which is in part to say that, common misconceptions notwithstanding, whiteness is not at the center of Black life. But for racialised subjects in a world profoundly shaped by white supremacy, the contents and consequences of whiteness and whiteness are among the important conditions to be monitored and managed. And the prospect of uprooting the conditions that enable white supremacy has often been at the forefront of Black aesthetic cultural production, theory, and criticism.

Examples of work in this reconstructionist problem-space abound. Think of the traditions of abolitionist writing and oratory in the nineteenth century US,

or of James Baldwin's remarkable reflection on the limits and costs of racist culture, *The Fire Next Time*. Or consider the possibility that the entire Black aesthetic tradition, with its sometimes explicit, usually implicit insistence on the human depth and dimensions of black life, is an exercise in reconstructionist politics.

## 7. Black life/art/identity matters

I've suggested that "Black aesthetics" names a dynamic tradition of taking up the recurring questions and inhabiting the central problem-spaces that emerge in relation to the aesthetic dimensions of black life. I've suggested further that the question of reconstruction – of whether and how to uproot the conditions that enable white supremacy, and to rebuild a formerly racist culture on racially egalitarian grounds – is at the core of one of these problem-spaces. These suggestions position us to consider some questions and cases that will help to clarify both the idea of a Black aesthetic tradition and the way contemporary work in the tradition undertakes the work of reconstruction.

The first question begins with a worry about how to draw the line between reconstructionist and redemptionist projects. Put differently, in the way I have heard it raised in relation to the kinds of arguments I have rehearsed here: is it possible to have an *anti-black* Black aesthetic? If the field is constituted by problem-spaces, and these are defined not by the answers to recurring questions but by the willingness to take up the questions, then why is redemptionism not part of the conversation of Black aesthetics? Why isn't D.W. Griffith an icon of the Black aesthetic tradition?<sup>22</sup>

The answer to the question of anti-black Black aesthetics lies in the formulation of the enterprise and of the question itself. If the aim of the work is to explore the aesthetic dimensions of black life, then a precondition of the work is taking black life seriously. Griffith clearly did not do this. His aim was to explore the aesthetic properties (and political uses) of anti-black stereotypes,

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<sup>22</sup> Aaron Meskin formulated the version of this question that I've found most challenging. Aaron Meskin, "What is Black Aesthetics," unpublished manuscript, delivered at the annual meeting of the American Society for Aesthetics, November 17, 2016.

and his work was, as a result, not only *not* about black life at all but actively damaging to the prospect of black survival.

The thought of an anti-black Black aesthetic might seem to derive some warrant from the related but ultimately distinguishable possibility of an anti-racialist Black aesthetic. There are various routes to this possibility, each running through one of the core problem-spaces of the tradition. Questions about racial authenticity can lead to skepticism about race as such, as can questions about the value and limits of racial solidarity (think *Do the Right Thing*, directed by Spike Lee (1989)) and about the inevitable hybridity and multiplicity of racial phenomena in a world of migration, mobility, and mixture (think of Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), and yes, that puts Twain in the tradition). But these examples just show that a serious examination of key dynamics in black life can lead one to doubt the utility of race-thinking. This is a far cry from finding that a serious commitment to white supremacy leads one to doubt, question, or deny the *value of the lives of people racialised as black*. So perhaps we can take a cue from contemporary activists in answering the question of anti-black Black aesthetics: black lives have to matter for an engagement to count as Black aesthetics. If they do not, then it does not.

The invocation of Mark Twain and D.W. Griffith above, and of Flannery O'Connor some time ago, leads to a second question: should Black identity not be a condition of participation in the tradition? Can Twain and O'Connor really count, while Griffith loses out not on principle but just because of the nature of his work? Should there not be a racial identity prerequisite for Black aestheticians?

The first thing to do with respect to the possibility of an identity test for participation in the tradition is detach persons from work products. I named three individuals above because their status as individuals helped with ease of exposition and with presenting the problem in an accessible form. But it is one thing to ask what kind of person O'Connor is, and a very different thing to ask whether this person has, with respect to any particular piece or body of work, advanced or retarded the conversation of Black aesthetics. One is a question of character, to which aesthetic theory and criticism is connected in ways that may be distant and that are surely complicated. The other, though,

is a question of evaluating works or a pattern of practice, and is more squarely a matter for critical evaluation.

With this clarification in place, the question of a racial identity prerequisite gets even easier to answer. On my account, racial identity is not a condition of participation in the tradition, nor should it be. People of all races can participate in the work of Black aesthetics, though works like *Open Casket* show the perils that attend this possibility. People of all races in fact *have* participated in the circuits of interaction and exchange that encouraged me to approach Black aesthetics as a tradition, as we can see from the history of the Harlem Renaissance and of musical idioms like blues, jazz, rhythm and blues, and hip-hop. The relationships between creative traditions and the Black aesthetic tradition are complicated, not least because the putatively racial coding of these and other traditions – like rock and country music – is itself a tool and product of racial formation processes.<sup>23</sup> But the story of how these different traditions intersect and overlap is too long to take up here. Suffice it to say that the tradition of Black aesthetics has to account for people like Eminem, Stevie Ray Vaughan, the Muscle Shoals studio musicians, and Charlotte Osgood Mason. Whatever pressures seem to recommend keeping these people out can be accommodated in other ways, like attending with care to the ethical questions about how a performer's relationship to the mechanisms of cultural production affects the performer's remunerative prospects.

The refusal to make black identity a necessary condition for participating in the tradition opens onto one more point worth making in this context. Black aesthetics need not be a parochially racial project in a way that screens off intersectional considerations. The idea is not that race is the deepest or most important aspect of human affairs, just that it is *one of several* important aspects. And the only way to explore its importance properly is to examine its relationships to other social identity categories. Examinations like these, reflecting variations on Stuart Hall's famous line about race being "the modality in which class is lived,"<sup>24</sup> in fact constitute one of the tradition's problem-spaces,

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23        Hughes 2015.

24        Hall 1980.

with works like Barry Jenkin's "Moonlight" and Ava DuVernay's *Queen Sugar* series at its heart.

## 8. Black Reconstruction, Black Panther

There are other questions to ask about this approach to Black aesthetics. But the space I have left can accommodate only one more, and it is a question that lies in the background of this entire essay. What does a reconstructionist Black aesthetic look like now? I have argued that this cultural moment in the US, with its open revival of redemptionist politics, puts the prospect of reconstruction on the table in a way that we have not seen in several decades. So what kind of culture work is engaging with this moment, animated by the imperatives and preoccupations of the Black aesthetic tradition?

I will answer this question by gesturing at one hopefully instructive case. I do not propose to work through all the salient details and interesting questions that distinguish this case. I offer it here as a gesture at the kind of work that Black aesthetic imperatives call forth today, and at the kind of impact this work can have.

On 16 February 2018, a Walt Disney film called "Black Panther" went into wide release in the US. The film was an episode in the "Marvel Cinematic Universe" (MCU) franchise, which brings to the big screen certain characters and stories from Marvel Comics. This film chronicles the exploits of T'Challa, leader of the fictional African kingdom of Wakanda. T'Challa is also, of course, a superhero, imbued, like all of Wakanda's rulers, with the power and the weapons to protect his subjects. Wakanda is a technologically advanced, multi-ethnic state that escaped the ravages of colonialism by dint of a muscular and strategic isolationism. The burden of the narrative is to determine the proper disposition of Wakanda's remarkable technological resources. Should they be kept hidden, obscured by the façade of a backward nation dominated, as one character says, by sheep and goat herders? Should they be given over to the power-mad, black nationalist mercenary Killmonger (T'Challa's long-lost cousin, it turns out), who means to give Black people worldwide the means to protect themselves from their enemies? Or should they be slowly integrated

into a kind of new world order, as T'Challa methodically leads Wakanda out of its isolation?

“Black Panther” was a cultural and a business breakthrough. It had the distinction of being the only MCU film with a black person in the lead role, and one of the very few big-budget films ever with a black director (Oscar-nominated director Ryan Coogler) and significantly black crew. It quickly earned more at the domestic box office than any previous superhero movie, and more than all but two other movies of any kind.

The film achieved this level of success because it spoke to a long-simmering demand for cinematic experiences that foreground black characters and life-worlds. Screenings of the film quickly became known for an unusually ludic, playfully Afrocentric atmosphere, sometimes even involving pop-up markets and performance spaces providing street food and African-inspired music at theatres effectively commandeered by groups of Black moviegoers.<sup>25</sup> This atmosphere reflected the multimodal appeal of the production. The narrative of course spoke with unusual directness to Black life, and made the unusual move of putting Black characters at the center of the action. But the film’s production design, under the direction of an African American woman named Hannah Beachler, also signaled an abiding interest in Black life. A variety of African-inspired stylistic references, from flying ships modeled on central African masks to clothing modeled on west African textile arts, embodied a commitment to a kind of Afro-futurist sensibility. In this spirit, many commentators noted that the final appearance of T'Challa’s airship seemed to echo the appearance of the “mothership” in the iconic recordings and performances of the musical group, Parliament-Funkadelic.

“Black Panther” explores several of the core problem-spaces of the Black aesthetic tradition. For example, a sophisticated cloaking technology makes Wakanda, or the most interesting bits of it, quite literally invisible to the outside world, a conceit that nicely invokes and inverts Ellison’s problematic of racialised erasure. Similarly, what I described above as “African-inspired” design elements raise in a rather stark form – and, I would argue, a fairly sophis-

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 25 I don’t know of any scholarly studies of this phenomenon yet, but an internet search will turn up plenty of popular references to, among other things, African American groups sponsoring watch parties, taking schoolchildren *en masse* to screenings at theatres rented for this purpose, and otherwise building activities around this film. See Bolekaja 2018.

ticated form – the same questions of authenticity that await every attempt to turn the products of particular African cultures into something broadly “African” for primarily non-African consumers. Think here of the way strip woven fabrics (primarily) from the Akan people – Kente – made their way around the world, going from complicated bearers of recondite local meanings to empty silk-screened patterns emblazoned on American t-shirts and hats.

For current purposes, though, the film’s most interesting exploration of a core theme from the Black aesthetic tradition is its engagement with the question of reconstruction. One way to read the film is as a staged encounter, like a Platonic dialogue, between three broad approaches to the prospect of undoing the legacies of white supremacy. T’Challa begins the film convinced (or uncritically accepting) of his father’s isolationism, which seems to follow from a basic assumption that it is either impossible or not worth the trouble to redeem a world that was once and still may be resolutely anti-Black. (The point is probably that it is not worth the trouble, since the category of Blackness does not mean much to either of them at the start.) His mercenary cousin, by contrast, agrees that the forces of anti-Blackness are irredeemable, but insists that the proper response involves meeting force with force. The world can be reconstructed, but by fire and blood. Finally, T’Challa emerges from his struggle with Killmonger to find a middle ground: he commits himself to a kind of Afro-futurist vision for (piecemeal) racial uplift, whereby the king of Wakanda, playing the part of an African Tony Stark or Bruce Wayne, contributes his riches and his technology to the task of reconstructing the communities that a world structured in racial dominance has left behind. (T’Challa never quite endorses his cousin’s racialised assignment of blame for black suffering; in this way he models the vaguely virtuous intentions appropriate to the hero in a mass culture entertainment.)

## 9. Conclusion: “Here and now and in your own hands”

If we think of philosophical aesthetics as a craft that one hones in the context of real-world institutions and relationships, we can come to see the philosophical depth and significance of phenomena that might otherwise strike us as frivolous or irrelevant. W.E.B. Du Bois had something like this in mind when he closed his “Criteria of Negro Art” address by insisting on the aesthetic significance of everyday Black lives. On his way to urging “Negro” culture workers

to take Black life seriously as a subject and “face our own past as a people,” he said this:

We are remembering that the romance of the world  
did not die and lie forgotten in the Middle Age[s];  
that if you want romance to deal with you must  
have it here and now and in your own hands.

I once knew a man and woman. They had two children, a  
daughter who was white and a daughter who was brown; the  
daughter who was white married a white man; and when her  
wedding was preparing the daughter who was brown pre-  
pared to go and celebrate. But the mother said, “No!” and the  
brown daughter went into her room and turned on the gas  
and died. Do you want Greek tragedy swifter than that?<sup>26</sup>

After two more stories in this spirit, he presses the point home:

Such is the true and stirring stuff of which Romance is born  
and from this stuff come the stirrings of men [sic] who are  
beginning to remember that this kind of material is theirs;  
and this vital life of their own kind is beckoning them on.<sup>27</sup>

Here as elsewhere, Du Bois's gender politics are woven deeply into his argument. But this fact should deepen the point at issue here. Critical intellectual work must involve an ongoing struggle to widen the circle of interlocutors, to create the conditions under which an epistemology of resistance can push back against the epistemology of ignorance. Du Bois actively worked to obscure the influence of black women like Jessie Fauset and Anna Julia Cooper

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26 Du Bois 1926, § 12-13.

27 Du Bois 1926, § 16.

on his work, and to limit their influence elsewhere. But we can take his words as a provocation to avoid his mistake.

What is the object of writing an aesthetic of reconstruction? One objective is to widen the circle of interlocutors. This might inspire us to build a shared social space, a community of inquiry that is more inviting to people who are in conversation with Fred Moten, Michele Wallace, Ryan Coogler, and Hannah Beachler. It can remind philosophical aestheticians that the things that interest these people can count as part of the “vital life of their own kind”. It widens the scope of our studies, enriches our reflections, and increases and clarifies our relevance to the world around us. This kind of material is *ours*, and the vital life of critical race aesthetics is beckoning us on.

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